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ABSTRACT

Tech prep has been considered "dead" by some commentators, but that assessment is usually made only in cases in which tech prep was merely a new label for an unchanged course or program. In many cases, tech prep has become more widely implemented and accepted as real changes have been made. Many of the concepts of tech prep will remain even if the name disappears. Tech prep is related to the newer school-to-work (STW) initiative. Major contributions of tech prep include the following: (1) tech prep has brought together educators and others who do not otherwise communicate; (2) tech prep has reinforced and sometimes even stimulated changes in classroom instruction; (3) tech prep has stimulated academic and vocational integration; (4) tech prep has raised expectations for more students in secondary schools; and (5) tech prep is becoming a pathway to college for nontraditional students. Remaining issues include the following: evaluation of tech prep; the distinctions between tech prep and STW; limited tech prep enrollments after 5 years; lack of parent and student inclusion in planning and implementation; and the competing goals and objectives that underpin both tech prep and STW. Tech prep and STW will succeed only if they involve a partnership of education with the entire community. (KC)

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Summary of Comments by Debra D. Bragg
on 'The Status of Tech Prep in the United States'
on December 6, 1996
American Vocational Association Annual Meeting, Cincinnati, OH

In considering what has happened with tech prep and school-to-work implementation in the United States, four researchers were invited to present research findings and policy recommendations to an audience of vocational education administrators attending the annual American Vocational Association (AVA) meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio on December 6, 1996. The panelists were Frank Hammons of Florida International University in Miami, Debra D. Bragg of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Carolyn Dornsife of University of California at Berkeley, and Tom Owens of the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory in Portland, Oregon. This synopsis contains comments made by Debra D. Bragg regarding the state of tech prep implementation in the United States. Dr. Bragg's presentation was organized to address the following five questions:

- Is tech prep dead?
- How are tech prep and school to work related?
- What are some of the major contributions tech prep is making?
- What issues continue to plague tech prep implementation?
- With respect to tech prep and school-to-work, what might the future hold?

Her comments follow.

Let's start with the question I am asked most frequently: Is tech prep dead?
My response, "It depends!" The answer rests largely on how fully tech prep was implemented in the first place. If tech prep was merely a new label for an unchanged course or program, then it may indeed be dead because it never lived in the first place. Where tech prep represented a name change, I suspect it provided just one more opportunity to tap into readily-accessible government funding. A few years ago monies were available for tech prep and more recently it was school-to-work. In the future, it will be something else. The cycle continues, but little real change occurs.

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Does this cycle really happen? Absolutely, I have seen it over and over again. The phenomenon is not limited to a particular region or state, although I do not necessarily see it as the norm. Many educators, particularly those intent on making real and lasting changes in education, look upon such practices with disdain. Of course, I recognize that when I and others make judgments about whether and to what extent change is really occurring, we are treading on thin ice. Change is never easy to assess in practice. There are always shades of gray in knowing whether reform is occurring. Yet, we would all agree that no change is problematic and, in some cases, tech prep has suffered that fate.

In contrast, in comparing tech-prep implementation in 1991 when federal funds were first available to today, I see a wider recognition and understanding of what tech prep is and, more importantly, what it could be. This understanding occurs among more educators of more disciplines than ever before, not only vocational educators. Of course, knowing what tech prep is or what it could be is not the same thing as acceptance, involvement, or promotion. But, in some ways, wider recognition of tech prep has produced greater acceptance and heightened involvement. In the future, as new people try to implement changes with school-to-work or other educational reforms, they are likely to seek assistance from educators who have experienced reforms in the past. Possibly, new reformers will seek assistance from those already engaged in tech-prep reform. Those of you who've shown a *serious* commitment to tech prep and implemented *real* changes can play an important role in educational reform. In fact, I challenge you to do so.

As we proceed, the most critical question is probably not whether tech prep is dead, but whether it will maintain its unique identity and distinctiveness? Strong parallels exist between tech prep and career education of the 1970s, but how many educators know about career education today outside of the vocational education community where it originated? Some, but probably not the majority. Yet, many models and concepts associated with career education are circulated today, but people don't relate the ideas to career education because they don't know about it. Concepts associated with career

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education exist (i.e., individualized career plans, career exploration activities), but they are not necessarily called "career education". Will the same thing happen to tech prep? Like career education, even if the name "tech prep" is not known, I suspect many of the concepts associated with tech prep such as secondary/postsecondary articulation will survive because they can yield tangible benefits for students. Other more complex or controversial components such as – dare I say it, applied academics – may not. Although, controversial changes sometimes grow, develop, and improve over time, increasing their chances of impact.

What is the relationship between tech prep and school to work?

Again, like my response to the previous question, I believe it depends! In my current research, I have seen tech prep and school-to-work (STW) organized in many different ways. This is somewhat of an oversimplification, but I think the relationship between these two national initiatives play out in three ways[1]. They are:

- Tech prep is the *foundation* for STW. STW is built upon much of what has already been done with tech prep.
- STW is the *umbrella* for tech prep. Tech prep is one pathway, option, or approach (either appearing horizontally or vertically) among several within a larger and more comprehensive STW system.
- Tech prep is exactly the *same thing* as STW. For all intents and purposes, the two initiatives are identical.

Do these different options matter? Yes, of course they do. Each of these views represents *major* differences in how tech prep and STW are designed and implemented. There are potentially valuable linkages between tech prep and STW, but only if these connections are clearly identified and carefully nurtured. Policy makers and practitioners

[1] When presented with these three options, about 35% of the 100+ audience selected "tech prep is the foundation for STW", approximately 50% selected "STW is the umbrella for tech prep", and maybe 15% indicated "Tech prep and STW are exactly the same thing".

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need to think seriously about what has happened with tech prep and STW in the past. They need to consider what should happen with them in the future.

If tech prep is seen as the "foundation" for STW, its strengths and weaknesses should be assessed with respect to the required components of STW. Components already in place should be reinforced; missing links should be added. If tech prep is not a foundation (or even taken into consideration) for STW, duplication of effort may occur. When lessons with tech prep or STW are not learned , opportunities for new advancements are lost.

My own experience with STW as an "umbrella" for tech prep suggests a 'top-down' approach, with STW looming over tech prep. In this approach, STW reigns supreme and tech prep and other reform strategies are subordinate. Often little of the STW system is clearly delineated. Consequently, this umbrella view may underestimate or even undermine what tech prep can offer to improve education. However, exceptions exist. When tech prep is assessed to identify its unique contributions to STW – and if those contributions indeed exist – it might be appropriate, indeed useful, to view STW as an organizing framework for tech prep and other educational innovations as well.

Can tech prep and school-to-work really be the same thing? Although the federal tech prep and school-to-work legislation are quite similar, they contain a number of different essential elements. Simply put, tech prep focuses more extensively on school-based reforms while school-to-work includes school-based learning but extends to work-based learning and the connections between the two. When local administrators claim tech prep and school-to-work are the same thing I generally find one of two perspectives. One, tech prep has evolved in such a way that it emulates many of the characteristics of school-to-work. Indeed, the two initiatives look very similar in practice. Or, two, there is a lack of understanding the full scope and scale of school-to-work whereas what has already happened with tech prep is presumed to be sufficient for school-to-work as well. This later situation requires that local (and sometimes state) administrators obtain additional information about school-to-work and its potential relationships to tech prep.

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What are some of the major contributions tech prep is making?

Based on research conducted by Carolyn Dornsife and others at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE), Tom Owens and his colleagues at Mathematica Policy Research, and the efforts of various states such as Frank Hammons in Florida, a number of real and significant improvements are taking place with tech prep, primarily at the secondary level (Bragg, 1997). Five of those contributions follow.

- Tech prep has brought together educators and others who do not otherwise talk to one another. In some cases these folks never knew there was a reason to talk before. Tech prep produced a dialogue concerning any number of issues of importance to teachers, employers and sometimes others. In my research, I have asked tech prep leaders to identify the secret of their success in opening up a dialogue and establishing new partnerships. Invariably, they say that educators can establish all the contracts and agreements they want, but it isn't until they begin communicating and caring about one another that partnerships take shape. Sounds too simple to be true, right? It may be, but open and honest communication are at the heart of any successful partnership I've come across. Good communication is a mainstay of tech prep, school-to-work and just about any other educational reform. Fortunately, some local tech-prep consortia have created environments where meaningful communication and worthwhile partnerships can evolve.
- Tech prep has reinforced and sometimes even stimulated changes in classroom instruction. Team teaching, cooperative learning, and technology-based instruction are evident in some sites where tech prep is being implemented. In those instances, tech prep has contributed to changes in how teachers teach and students learn. Of course, because parallel efforts such as the Essential Schools Coalition, Effective Schools, etc. have also emphasized more active student-focused instruction, it is difficult to discern what tech prep has contributed to the mix of changes in classroom instruction. Even so, it is likely tech prep has played a role in changing instructional practice, but these changes need to be documented more carefully in the future.

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- Tech prep has stimulated academic and vocational integration. For many educators the concept of integration of academic and vocational integration is vague or confusing. Lacking an administrative or curricular structure such as that provided by tech prep and now school-to-work, local practitioners fail to make progress implementing academic and vocational integration. Even though significant efforts at integration are in the early stages just about anywhere one looks, tech prep has made inroads, particularly with the infusion of applied academics. While some applaud this accomplish, more advanced forms of integration need to be implemented in conjunction with tech prep, including interdisciplinary approaches and learning communities. Remember, just because academic and vocational integration is prominent in federal vocational education (Perkins II) legislation does not mean the concept is understand or accepted elsewhere. In fact, including integration within federal vocational education but not elsewhere may be its nemesis. It has taken (and will continue to take) a great deal of time for academic and vocational integration to be adopted across the curriculum on a widespread basis, if ever.
- Tech prep has contributed to raising expectations for more students in secondary schools. Although not a universal goal, tech prep has been a primary vehicle for some schools to increase the participation of students in higher academic courses, particularly in math and science. Applied academics courses such as algebra, trigonometry, chemistry, or physics have attracted students who would not have taken such courses and spurred them on to college-preparatory algebra, trigonometry, chemistry, or physics. Data on this phenomenon are spotty; however, the fact that it exists at all suggests tech prep's focus on increasing academic rigor for more students may be bona fide. Unfortunately, only a minority of tech prep coordinators across the United States see "increased academic course taking" as a goal of tech prep (Bragg, forthcoming). Yet, when tech prep is focused exclusively on vocational-course participation – renaming vocational education as tech prep – this potential benefit is lost.
- Linked closely to my previous point is the fact that tech prep is becoming a pathway for non-traditional students to advance to college. Vocational education has been

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hamstrung by public policy that has mandated that it be "less than baccalaureate", legitimizing claims that vocational education contributes to tracking in secondary schools. With tech prep's emphasis on articulation to the two-year and sometimes four-year college levels, tech prep has the potential to break the mold in terms of thinking of vocational education as sub-baccalaureate only. To be sure, a large proportion of youths partaking of tech prep are "disadvantaged" because they are poor and minority (more so than college prep but less than vocational education), but that doesn't mean they should be "disadvantaged" by the school system itself. It is time to stop the "dead-end" image associated with vocational education and the tracking phenomenon that is so closely aligned with it.

What issues remain for tech prep?

There are many but, due to time constraints, I'll focus on only five.

- Since tech prep has played out in so many different ways and because many states and most localities have not evaluated tech prep no matter how it has been implemented[2], we know very little about tech prep as it exists today. Accomplishments that might be attributable to tech prep are not documented. Problems are unknown. In either case, without systematic evaluation it is difficult to improve and progress.
- Tech prep and school-to-work are similar, but different; complimentary, yet unique; supportive, but independent. The distinctions between tech prep and school-to-work are difficult to discern in the murky world of policy and program implementation, creating tensions that sometimes spill over into conflict. Devotion to one or the other initiative sometimes run deep, creating difficulties when new collaborations are attempted. If educators and others are to make tech prep and school-to-work work,

[2] Title IIIE, The Tech Prep Education Act, of the Perkins II Vocational Education Amendments of 1990 did not stipulate evaluation as an essential element, although the overall bill did emphasize the use of performance measures and standards for vocational education programs. Research conducted by NCRVE and Mathematica Policy Research suggests some states linked evaluation of tech prep to vocational education programs while others did not. In the later case, little or no systematic evaluation of tech prep has occurred at the state or local levels.

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effective communication is needed regarding preferred goals, expectations and outcomes.

- With over five years of experience, it is alarming how limited enrollments are in tech-prep. True, up-to-date and accurate enrollment figures are nearly impossible to get, but even when estimates are ventured they suggest far fewer secondary students are participating in tech prep than Dale Parnell's vision of the "neglected majority" (1985). In local tech prep consortia, some with nearly a decade of experience, the proportion of students matriculating to community colleges is not much over typical secondary-to-community college matriculation rates of less than 20 percent. If not tech prep, where are the "neglected majority" going? With time, will enrollments improve? These questions must be addressed.
- Thus far students and parents have been silent partners in tech-prep planning and implementation. The language of some consortium leaders suggests tech prep is something that is done *to* students (and thereby their parents) rather than *with* them. Until tech prep (along with other) reformers recognize the role students and parents can and must play, little progress will be made. Educators *must* find ways to break the silence and engage students and parents in meaningful dialague about educational reform.
- Underlying both tech prep and school-to-work are competing goals and objectives. Some educators (mostly vocational) see these initiatives as fundamentally about enhancing workforce competitiveness; other educators (mostly academic) see them about enhancing academics through alternative pedagogies. Educators of the first persuasion look for mostly outcomes linked to job placement, employer satisfaction, and market share. Educators of the later persuasion could care less about such outcomes. They seek to prepare students for higher-order studies. Their goals are to prepare students to solve problems, think critically, and pursue upward educational opportunities. (Jobs, salaries, and global competitiveness are issues for later in life.) Left unattended, the differences in what is valued by vocational and academic educators brew under the surface. To make progress, these differences must be recognized. They will not simply go away.

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What might the future hold?

No one has a crystal ball to tell us what the future will hold for tech prep/school-to-work, no matter how much we would like to hear it. Within the vocational education community, tech prep has fairly strong support at the present. Rumors suggest tech prep will remain a prominent part in federal vocational education legislation being drafted by the Clinton administration. If so, the challenge is to strengthen the weaknesses of the current tech prep approach, maintaining its positive features.

Although viewed with skepticism at first, tech prep has grown in stature among vocational educators. In some circles, tech prep is viewed as the major success of the federal Perkins II legislation, due largely to the fact that tech prep has gained support from constituencies that wield power and influence, namely business and industry. However, the influence exerted by business and industry often strains other partnerships central to tech prep, particularly the involvement of academic educators, making it difficult to maintain the kind of balance required to make tech prep successful. If tech prep is to be effective, partnerships among a wide range of constituencies must be sustained. If these partnerships can be built, the future of tech prep may be bright. Without them, tech prep cannot possibly succeed.

As a vocational administrator, if you are doing anything related to tech prep or school-to-work alone – without the support of your other colleagues in education, without the involvement of students and parents, without participation from the community – ask yourself why. Without the active involvement of the *entire* community, one has to wonder if the effort is worthwhile. What will it contribute to the good of the overall system? How can an isolated effort impact the educational system in nearly as significant a way as a more concerted one? Many educators already ask themselves such questions, as they should. In the future, our challenge is to be sure all educators are asking such questions… and seeking answers in partnership with others.

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